

**In short, what you are meeting here is a clan, the Sheridans and their related families.**

**Life on the road has become too hard; too dangerous. It has not been possible to find suitable or acceptable pitches on local councils sites – though many have tried. Their situation, like that of all Travellers, has been exacerbated by the 1994 Criminal Justice Act which has resulted in the closure of a significant number of local government sites.**

**Regrettably – and this regret is shared by local MP Mr John Baron – the Act did away with clauses in the 1968 Caravan Sites Act which placed an obligation on local councils to set up sites.**

**So over the past 18 months, they have been buying plots of land in Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and Essex, on which to settle themselves. This, if you like, represents privatisation; Travellers providing for their own needs at their own expense, instead of depending on local councils. But of course they are still dependent on them for planning approval, which is why we are here today.**

**It has been a collective decision and to some extent a reluctant decision.**

**Involving as it does turning their backs, to a large degree, on the old Travelling way of life followed for many generations. But having arrived at that decision and having literally set it in concrete, at great cost, in some cases using up their savings, I can assure you there will be no going**

**back. They have no mind to go back on the road. The Sheridans of Dale Farm will not be shifted.**

**I say that as a matter of fact. And things will go a lot better and smoother for all of us if we can start to work together, instead of in contrary directions.**

**Dale Farm then, is part of the private-venture process. But Dale farm is a rather special case, because in this location Travellers have been settling themselves for a very long time. To my personal knowledge for at least that past 40 years. Gypsies have lived in and frequented this part of Essex since long before the building of Basildon new town.**

**The former scrapyard where the present development is taking place was in operation from the 1960s. Incidentally, it was build on a "plotland" site as distinct from greenbelt (I leave the niceties of the difference between the two to the planning experts). I would also comment that what has been created here by the Sheridans looks a lot better than the old scrapyard full of car-bodies – which nonetheless was allowed to exist within the greenbelt for many decades.**

**In addition to the individual plots, they have pooled together to resurface roads, connect fencing and much else. Details of the individual plots, circumstances, schooling and medical needs, are being provided, I believe,**



**by Dr Kenrick. What I am focusing on is the community as a whole, both its internal workings and outside links.**

**The Sheridans are Irish Travellers. They make no bones about that, Indeed they are proud of their heritage. But contrary to common belief, they have not just come off the boat. The great majority were born here, and of the older generation many came thirty and forty years ago. Legally and culturally they are British, being additionally recognised as a distinct ethnic group. Besides, the UK and Ireland are both now part of the European Union.**

**As Irish Travellers, they are members, collectively, of the Irish Travellers Movement, which in turn is linked through the Traveller Law Reform Coalition to the Gypsy Council. The Gypsy Council has existed since 1966 and has its head office in Essex, just nine miles from here, at Aveley. A caravan has this week been put at its disposal for use as a mobile office at Dale Farm.**

**The Irish Travellers Movement and the Traveller Law Reform Coalition have been lobbying in recent months (with the help of a professional lobbyist) for Parliamentary support to bring back legislation which will once again place an obligation on local councils to oversee the provision of an adequate number of caravan parks. I say oversee because this will cover both local council and private sites. The TLRB will re-enforce the encouragement already given to Travellers to establish their own places.**



**To date some 50 MPs, across all parties, have signed the Early Day Motion in support of the Traveller Law Reform Bill.**

**And on 23 January, Mr Egan will be meeting with the Irish in Britain All-Parliamentary Party Group at the House of Commons and will be raising with them the issue of Dale Farm and aspects of the TLRB.**

**Meanwhile, there is a requirement on Basildon, along with every other local council, to draw up and have in place by July of this year a new Strategy for the Homeless. This obligation has been placed on local authorities by the Homelessness Act 2002. Each local council strategy plan has to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation for all homeless people in their area.**

**By definition, Travellers on unauthorised sites, which includes land owned by them but still lacking approval as caravan parks, are recognised as homeless.**

**In the past, those local authorities taking a hard line against**

**Travellers (and I do not include Basildon) have relied on the Willingness of Travellers, when put under pressure, to move on to somewhere else. It has been a futile circus. Recent research shows that some £4m a year has been spent on short-term move-on operations, the blocking up of real or potential camping places and legal proceedings.**

**A huge waste of time and money which may over the past 25 years amounted to as much as £100m. This policy has been stigmatised as a UK-version of ethnic cleansing. But that era has come to an end, or is rapidly coming to an end as far as forced evictions from private sites are concerned.**

**Already, the Housing Act 1996 places a duty on local councils to allocate accommodation to the homeless. The argument which has yet to be settled, probably through the courts (and several test cases are pending according to the Birmingham-based Community Law Partnership) is the character of this accommodation. As recently as two months ago, Mid Bedfordshire Council was able to convince a High Court judge that it had fulfilled its legal obligations by offering**

**Housing, through a housing association, to families facing eviction from their own land – as Dale Farm plot-owners may – despite the fact that, in most cases, the Travellers did not want bricks and mortar housing. They wanted either to be left where they were, on the 17-acre Woodside site that they owned, or be offered alternative land. Mid Beds has far spent over £500,000 on an issue which has still to be settled by a hearing in the Court of Appeal.**

**It is, I believe, only a matter of times, perhaps months, before this somewhat grey area becomes starkly black and white. You will not be able simply to get an injunction and evict families onto the road with nowhere to go. Under the new**



**Homeless Strategy, which of course will include a count of the current homeless in any given area, the local council will be mandated to say what is going to be done for the homeless. Section 175 (2) of the Housing Act provides that a person is homeless even when they have accommodation if that accommodation consists of a movable structure and there is no place where they are entitled or permitted to place it and reside in it.**

**In the case of Basildon this must include the hundred or so Sheridan clan, not to mention another 300 Travellers on the longer established adjoining plots – which some here seem to think can be made to shift by such mean-minded measures as depriving people, including children, of a clean water supply and electricity. That is a wish that I have heard expressed at a public meeting chaired by Mr Baron.**

**It would be better if those people came to realise that since removal, or ethnic-cleansing, is impossible, it will be more fruitful to come to terms with the issue. And here leadership at Dale Farm, the Irish Travellers Movement, the Gypsy Council and others are ready to pitch in and lend a hand. We have already been asked for and have undertaken to set up a liaison with the local police, to deal with specific local complaints and issues. The initial approach was made to Mr Egan and myself immediately after the public meeting on 7 December last by Community Affairs Officer Jeff White.**

**The chaplain to Catholic Travellers, Father Joe Browne was at that meeting and has become involved, as have local nuns and the local Catholic primary school. I believe. A local businessman is considering opening a convenience shop on Dale Farm.**

**A junior football club is being formed which will participate in the London area Junior Travellers and Roma League, consisting of some dozen teams, both boys' and girls', playing for the Woodside Solidarity Cup.**

**One policy option being considered by the Liberal Party is promotion of a "demonstration model" Travellers' community. And I am suggesting to Lord Avebury that Dale Farm be put forward as a candidate for such a project. If this is taken up, we will be urging Mr John Prescott to use his good offices as Deputy Prime Minister to help set up a**

**partnership between Basildon District Council, a housing association (willing to become involved with caravan plots), and Travellers' <sup>incl. Gypsy Welfare Centre</sup> organisations. This would have as its aim the transformation of Dale Farm into a model for the rest of the country.**

**If we succeed, what is perceived by some today as an ugly duckling will become a development of which the district can be proud.**

**Finally, I will leave this Inquiry and you sir, to reconcile Article 8 of the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which in 1997 was expanded to say, "The**



**State itself must refrain from forced evictions and ensure that the law is enforced against its agents or third parties who carry out forced evictions (...); and further in Article 16 states, "Evictions should not result in individuals being rendered homeless or vulnerable to the violation of other human rights. Where those affected are unable to provide for themselves, that State Party must take all appropriate measures, to the maximum of its available resources, to ensure that adequate alternative housing, resettlement or access to productive land, as the case may be, is available."**

**In conclusion, I urge that the necessary planning permission be granted to the persons involved in this inquiry, and that enforcement notices be withdrawn. To take an opposite course and to start any attempt at dismantling and destroying the Dale Farm settlement (which is virtually a village of some 400 people) will cause immeasurable disruption and suffering, and could lead to serious confrontations which would inevitably have racial overtones. Sir, put simply, you will be driving people to the wall; desperate to protect their homes, their children and the only morsel of security and dignity that they presently possess.**

**If an eviction is attempted, at some point , then this Inquiry and the recommendations that flow from it, will have to bear a part of the responsibility for any confrontation and**



**possible injuries that ensue. At Woodside, on November 4 last, it was only thanks to the experienced and well-timed mediation of senior police officers that a conflict between contractors and Travellers was curtailed. Home Office Circular 45/95 advises police officers to take account of the welfare of children, the elderly and disabled people when present at such an event and to their credit they did so. No eviction took place and no further attempt to move people made.**

**I believe, a salutary lesson has been learnt; forced evictions, particularly on that scale, are no longer an option.**

**Considering how many more people might get caught up in any attempt at a forced removal from Dale Farm, I fear there could be a very ugly situation, very possibly a riot with racial connotations.**

**All of us concerned with Dale Farm want to avoid this situation even arising and hope that the present inquiry will be a step in the right direction – away from confrontation and towards reconciliation.**